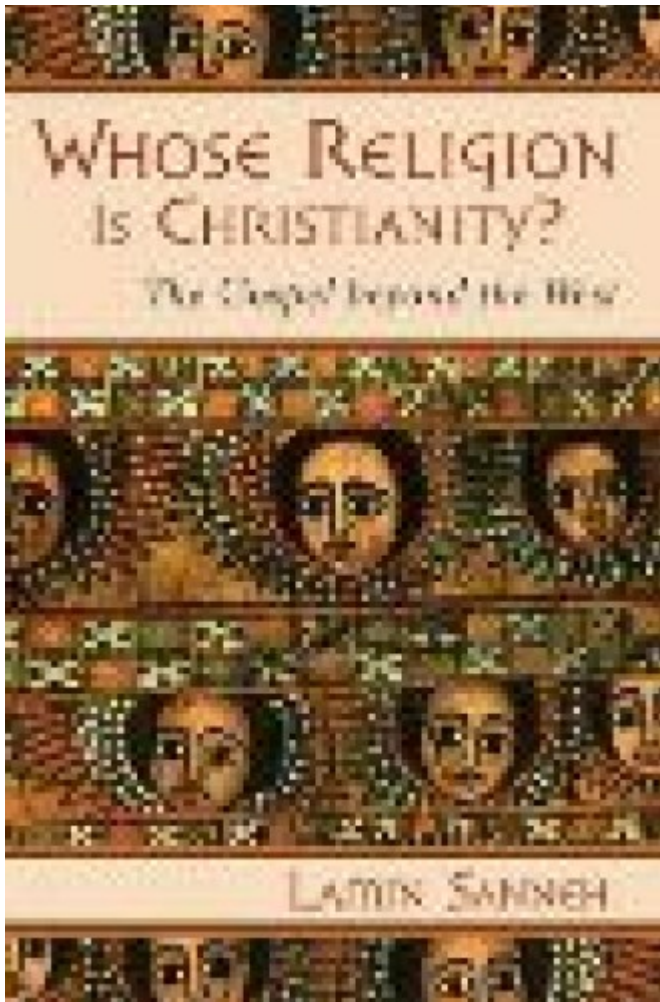


Global faith

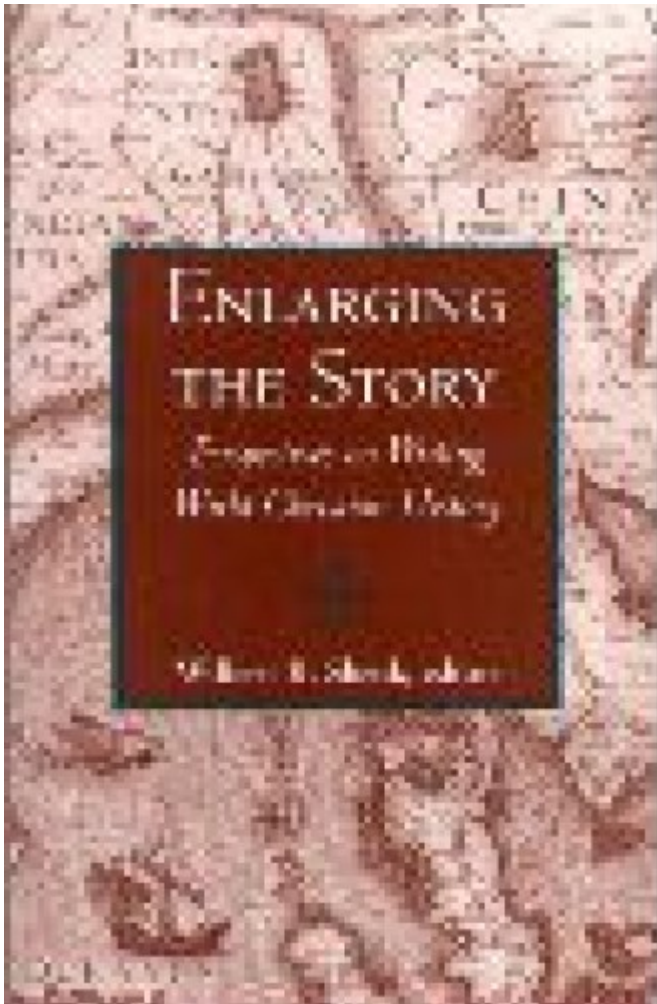
By [Dale T. Irvin](#) in the [July 27, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West

Lamin Sanneh
Eerdmans



Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History

Wilbert R. Shenk, ed.

Orbis

Five hundred years ago Christianity was little more than the regional religion of the patchwork of societies that made up Europe. In other places where Christianity had once been dominant—North Africa, Egypt, Nubia, Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor—Islam had triumphed, and Christians had either disappeared or become minorities hemmed in by the laws of *dhimmi* (“protected minority”). In Mesopotamia and Persia, where churches had once thrived, Christians were now a remnant. A promising mission to Central Asia and China had sputtered out.

A small but significant Christian community continued to exist in the south of India. Although relatively isolated from the rest of world Christianity and fully integrated

into Indian culture as a separate caste, it maintained a strong Christian identity that reached back through memory and tradition to St. Thomas, the apostle to the East. In Africa, Christians had a meaningful presence only in the ancient Christian kingdom of Ethiopia.

The process of making the European continent Christian had only recently been completed. The last non-Christian tribes on the northwestern frontier were converted on the eve of the Reformation. The last Islamic kingdom in Iberia was defeated the year Columbus set sail for the Indies. Within Europe, the religious-cultural formation called Christendom, which had been under construction for almost 1,000 years, was beginning to break apart—a process to which the gradual birth of the modern nation state significantly contributed.

The emerging nation states began launching voyages of discovery and conquest, taking Christianity with them—first in Roman Catholic and then in various Protestant (or evangelical) forms. The modern missionary movement accelerated to epic proportions during the 19th century, bringing agents of various kinds of Western Christianity to virtually every corner of the world.

Though this mission was successful, it was not necessarily successful in the ways that Western Christian missionaries and their strategists had imagined. What Western missionaries intended and what indigenous agents of conversion apprehended in the communication of the gospel were often two different things. That fundamental borderline continues to run through world Christianity today. Along it the space opens up for a new understanding of Christianity. The modern world was a global phenomenon from its inception. Its construction entailed the contributions not just of the West, but of Asians, Africans and indigenous Americans as well.

In the same way, modern Christianity has been a global phenomenon. Although Western forms of thinking have been dominant, they have not been the only way Christians have expressed their faith. A Presbyterian church building in Seoul might look like it belongs in Geneva, and its Presbyterian elders might be well acquainted with the Westminster Confession of Faith, but the style of prayer and the intensity of devotion are decisively Korean.

Now, at the end of the modern age, the success of that missionary project (and especially of the apprehension of the gospel along the indigenous side of the line

between missionary and convert) emerges as perhaps the most important factor in world Christian life today. Coupled with the staggering de-Christianization of the traditional European “homeland” of Christendom, the shift is enormous. Christianity, long identified as primarily a Western, European religion, is no longer. It is now predominantly a religion of Africans, Asians and Latin Americans, and of the descendants of these regions who now live in the North Atlantic world. According to recent estimates, as many as 60 percent of the world’s Christians now live in the Southern Hemisphere.

Many Western Christians face a serious intellectual lag in coming to grips with what all this means. This lag is evident even in such books as Philip Jenkins’s widely read *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (2002). Jenkins does a good job of describing the transformation that has taken place over the past half-century, but when he discusses what this transformation means he falls back on Western perspectives and interpretive categories. The problem is evident in the very title of his book. What is taking place today is not the construction of a new Christendom, be it of the south, west, east or north. World Christianity has not one center, but many.

Jenkins tries to describe the situation through the lens of a “church/sect” typology he borrows from Ernst Troeltsch, but this distorts what is really going on in, for example, Brazil or China. He seems to assume that Christian culture and politics in other parts of the world can be understood through categories derived from the past 200 years of Western liberal democracy and misses the fact that these communities have histories of their own.

Unfortunately, Jenkins is not alone in exhibiting the continuing effects of Western intellectual dominance. Even in places of intellectual formation in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the legacy of Western Christianity is still evident. The result is a skewing of our understanding not just of the contemporary Christian world, but of doctrine and even the Bible itself. Simply adding native stories to Western Christian traditions of doctrine and practice is not enough. Something much more fundamental is called for if we are to grasp the significance of what has taken place during the past 500 years and to comprehend what is taking place.

Two recent books help advance this intellectual project. Both do so by calling for a fundamental shift from a Eurocentric or Western understanding to a polycentric or world understanding of Christianity. Lamin Sanneh seeks to broaden our categories

horizontally, going beyond a Western worldview, while Wilbert R. Shenk sets out to broaden our historical categories vertically by going back in time. He explores resources for developing the larger global frame of reference contemporary world Christianity requires.

Sanneh, professor of missions and world Christianity at Yale Divinity School, is one of the most influential interpreters of world Christianity today. *Whose Religion Is Christianity?* makes his scholarship accessible to a general readership. Written in a question-and-answer format, it has the flavor of an extended interview and resembles a traditional catechism, which was perhaps part of the author's intention. The book recapitulates themes and arguments Sanneh has already explored elsewhere in more depth.

The questions Sanneh's imagined interlocutor poses are composites drawn from the arsenal of responses the author has encountered following his presentations. The content and tone of the questions suggest that the questioner is a moderately skeptical but sympathetic secularist who wonders if Christian faith will survive in a post-Enlightenment world. In this respect Sanneh seems to be self-consciously locating himself in a theological vein that reaches back to Schleiermacher and the so-called "cultured despisers" of religion. The answers Sanneh provides are drawn from the experience and reality of Christians living beyond the purview of the West.

The result is a highly dialogical engagement between the post-Christian West and post-Western Christianity. Sanneh persistently criticizes the global pretensions of Western Christianity. Global Christianity, he suggests, is what Westerners think is happening around the world. World Christianity is what is really happening. While Sanneh's arguments and illustrations are almost entirely drawn from Africa (China first appears halfway through the book, and then only for a brief comment), his thesis is that Christianity belongs to all cultures.

Though the West still has the material and intellectual advantage, there is a vitality in Christianity outside the West that is generating its own sense of purpose and meaning. Europe has something to learn about Christianity from Africa, Sanneh insists. He does not discount the experience of the West, and he is as comfortable quoting George Herbert as he is the Masai creed. Nor does he shy away from controversial Western missiological doctrines of the past. For instance, he revisits the old belief in Christianity's civilizing mission to Africa to address the challenge of building African civil life today.

At the heart of Sanneh's argument is a fundamental methodological shift in mission studies: from emphasizing the experience of missionaries from the West to emphasizing the experience of the recipients beyond the West. Mission studies must not limit itself to discussing those who sent missionaries, detailing missionary labors in foreign lands and exploring the conceptual frameworks that guided them. It needs to examine the dynamics at work in those who received the message, and the new forms of Christianity the converts constructed out of the gospel message and the materials of their indigenous culture.

Missionary translations of the message provided the primary impetus for this new form of Christian agency, preserving indigenous cultures by fixing them in written texts and preserving the traditional names of God in translating the Bible into new cultures. From this perspective Sanneh is ready to argue that Western critics of missions (religious or secular) are not so much the leading edge of progressive theology as they are the last defenders of the colonial enterprise. It is only a lingering guilt complex that prevents Western observers from seeing what is happening on the ground, appreciating the legacy of indigenous agents, and understanding the future direction of the Christian churches.

Sanneh observes that "people want to interpret Christianity by standards of exegesis and doctrine familiar to them, something that the Christendom model of the church warranted. World Christianity, by contrast, must be interpreted by a plurality of models of inculturation in line with the variety of local idioms and practices. The mental habits of Christendom predispose us to look for one essence of the faith, with a corresponding global political structure as safeguard, whereas world Christianity challenges us to pay attention to the dynamic of power of the gospel and the open-ended character of communities of faith."

That quotation provides an excellent introduction to *Enlarging the Story*. Sanneh himself is one of the authors represented in it. The chapters were originally presented as papers at a 1998 symposium at Fuller Theological Seminary convened by Willbert Shenk, a professor of mission and contemporary culture at that school. (In the interest of full disclosure: I was one of the participants at the symposium.)

The book critiques the Western paradigms that dominate world Christian thinking and lead people to assume that world Christianity has an exclusively Western heritage. "The assumptions that have governed our understanding of Christian history during the past several centuries were all formed in the European context

where the church was identified with the cultural and religious majority and attention was focused largely on its institutional life,” Shenk writes. The “grand narrative” implied by these assumptions is called into question. At the same time a variety of corrective insights and new perspectives need to be developed in order to illuminate the path toward a new world Christian history.

Andrew Walls begins the project by examining some of the implications of the other worlds that are bursting in upon what has long passed as the standard historical narrative. “There is no way in which African and Asian church history can be incorporated within a traditional Western-type syllabus; nor can they be appendages to Western church history,” he writes. New lenses are required, a variety of which are offered throughout the book. Repeatedly the authors come back to the need to hold together in mutual reinforcement what Sanneh calls “the principles of local agency and indigenous cultural appropriation” and the overall framework of world Christianity’s diversity.

While there is no single standard for defining the latter, there are commonalities or fields of generalization, various authors in the volume point out. The widest horizon for these commonalities is that of encounter and assimilation, argues A. Mathias Mundadan. In that framework, the principles related to specific local situations such as the history of Christianity in India can be articulated.

Several of the authors look specifically at the implications of a new historiography for the study of mission history. Philip Yuen-Sang Leung draws upon his academic career to map the shift that has occurred in Chinese scholarship—from studying mission history to studying Chinese church history, and the more subtle shift from a Western to a Chinese Christian perspective in doing so. Gerald J. Pillay applies these insights to the teaching of church history, seeking to overcome the artificial division between church history and general history and thereby to connect the particular with the whole. A final chapter by a committee of five sets forth an ambitious agenda for the field.

Running through both books are several common themes. One is the need to pay greater attention to the social and cultural dynamics at play in local situations. Christians in Pakistan might put up a banner outside their church announcing a conference on Christian-Muslim dialogue, while Christians in Malaysia would not. Understanding why this is so requires a better knowledge of the specific political Islamic context in which each community is located. A second theme is the need to

reground the work of scholarship in perspectives other than those derived from the West. A more complex “we” is called for, and a resulting historiography that is polycentric and plural. To understand why Christianity is growing in China today we need to understand the country’s larger history, including the history of Confucianism and Buddhism. Christians in the Zionist churches of South Africa or the Aladura churches of West Africa are not primarily answering questions raised by Western intellectuals, but questions raised by their own history and culture.

Finally, both books argue that historians and believers must simultaneously press the boundaries of the universality and particularity of faith. What does the Masai Creed actually mean when it states, regarding Jesus’ time in the grave, “but the hyenas did not touch him”? What light does such an expression of faith shed upon the Christianity that Western churches embrace as their own? Bringing into view the implications of such diversity for faithful Christian living may be among the most important tasks for students of world Christianity.